

Repent and expect

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 16, 1998](#) issue

Tis the season for columnists to write their annual grumpy columns about how the season is misused. Here's my contribution. Advent, a time of penitence and expectation, should not be skipped over in the rush to Christmas. But why grump about the misuse of a season that hardly gets observed at all? Back when Christians were sometimes penitent and full of expectation, they did observe Advent. Now? Quick: name an Advent hymn in your hymnal. Churches might as well take that section out since many congregations start singing the Mall's Greatest Christmas Carol Hits on the first Sunday after Thanksgiving. Columnists don't know Advent exists, and each year fewer Christians do. Message: repent ye, and expect.

My second complaint relates to Thanksgiving. The stores, having resacralized Halloween, have not exploited this holiday. So it offers real potential for creative penitence and, if not expectation, then reminiscence. Gratitude is the theme of the day.

"Gratitude" has taken some lumps. I recently read a newspaper columnist's list of words that had become New Age clichés. Amid those that deserve to be shelved was "gratitude." Are the New Agers going to take away all the good terms, as they have "spiritual," "spirituality," "angels" and "God"?

Let's rescue "gratitude," and reclaim a theocentric understanding of it. Let's encourage being not just "grateful for" but "grateful to." Here's where creative grumpiness comes in. David Schrock-Shenk wrote for the *Gospel Herald* and *U.S. Catholic* a wonderful self-examination, "Why I Won't Thank God for All the Things I Own." It is a Mennonite-style piece that questions whether we should be hypergrateful for all the things in our closets and all the foods on the table. Too many of these are produced by vastly underpaid overseas workers.

Schrock-Shenk and his family do enjoy things and life. But they also want to acknowledge the gap between the rich and the poor. His article is the kind that cynical antiliberals cite as full of *faux compassion*. Their charges are mean and wrong, but coming from such sources, they are compliments to one who is concerned more with the divine Thou than with the worldly It.

My third gripe concerns "the real meaning of Christmas." On our porch arrived a catalog too big to stuff through the mail slot: Neiman Marcus's *The Book* (\$10.00, it says on the cover). Amid pages of pricey luxury items is a column called "The Real Meaning of Christmas," by Thomas Moore, bestselling author of *Care of the Soul*.

Moore sneaks in "I cherish my Catholicism as much as I honor my Jewish and Buddhist friends" and celebrates "this spirit of heartfelt family and community that the Child was all about, that the menorah symbolizes, and that the increase of daily light represents." Let's celebrate his sensitivity to the fact that manners in a pluralist society call for the generosity of spirit that has him giving equal time to Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism.

Moore, however, who knows better, is puzzled when he hears people ask, "What is the real meaning of Christmas?" He says the real meaning lies in, among other things, "the quest for an appropriate gift," examples of which crowd the surrounding catalog copy. But as I paged through the catalog it suddenly occurred to me: in Christmas observed without Advent, Moore is accurate. It's an almost Child-less Christmas. That is its real meaning here and now. Repent. Expect.